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Introduction to Film Theory class
Northwestern Univ. 1981

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Here is the first paragraph of a well-known and respected book of film theory,
Rudolf Arnheim's Film as Art:

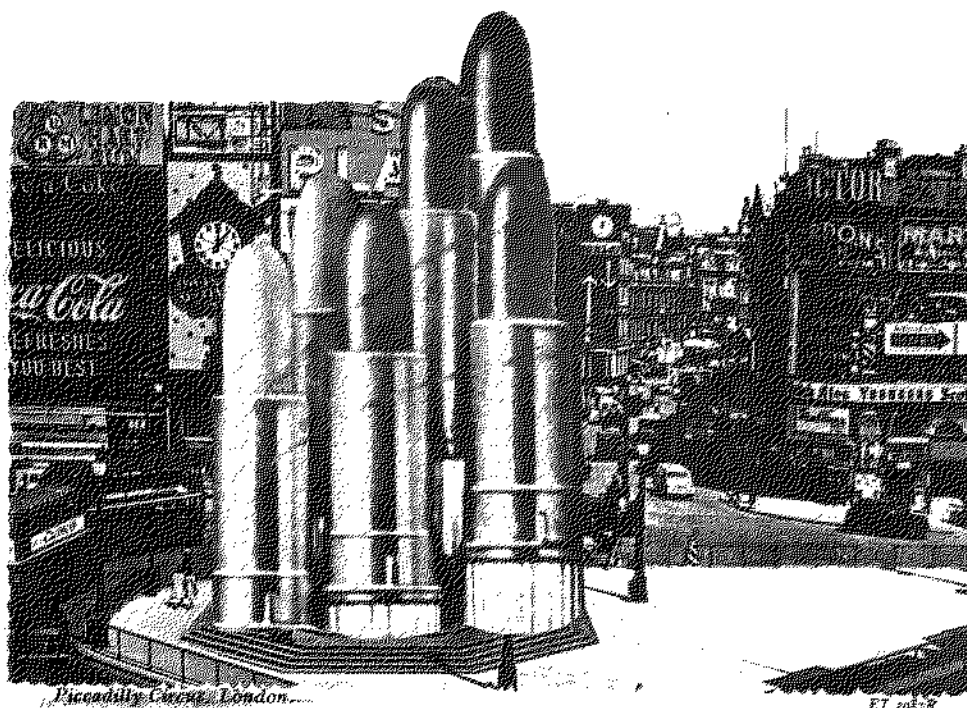
1933

SELECTIONS ADAPTED
FROM *FILM*

1 *Film and Reality*

Film resembles painting, music, literature, and the dance in this respect—it is a medium that may, but need not, be used to produce artistic results. Colored picture post cards, for instance, are not art and are not intended to be. Neither are a military march, a true confessions story, or a strip tease. And the movies are not necessarily film art.

And here is a xeroxed copy of a reproduction (as a postcard) of a Claes Oldenburg collage which is in the Tate Gallery, London: "Lipsticks in Piccadilly Circus, London, 1966."



How do you define art?

Is Arnheim right? Is Oldenburg? How do you decide?

The following essay is given to students in A12-1, the introduction to photography, film, and sound recording course for undergrads. What basic theoretical assumptions does it explicitly set forth?

The Image

Because images are basic units of film, video, and broadcast television, we're starting this course by considering what an image is and how it works. Knowing more about images should help us in making our own.

We'll start with the isolated still image as we often find it in painting, photography, graphic design, drawing, and other representational forms. Later in the course we'll be dealing with images arranged in a sequential series (as in a slide show, comic strip, photo novel, film or tv program), images in movement (as in flip books, film, and video), and images used with sound.

Images seem to be very simple things--you see them, you understand them. We're probably all aware of just how much information we constantly receive by using our eyes. The power of thinking that "seeing is believing" in everyday life is easily transferred to the experience of an image. Thus we tend to give more credit to an eyewitness report than to a second-hand one, and we tend to find a photographic report even more believable than an eyewitness report because we can "see for ourselves."

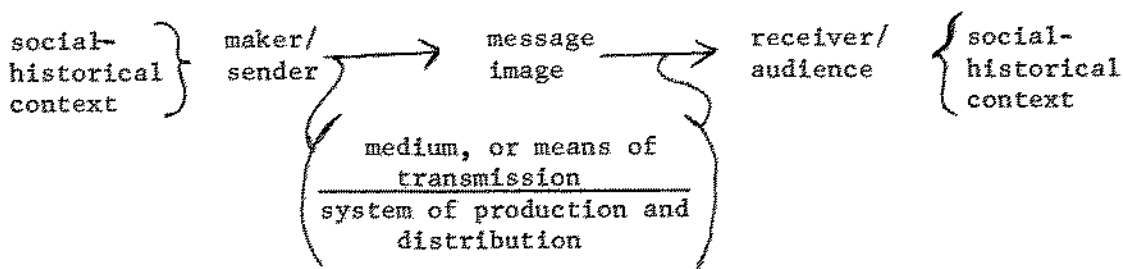
But what do we see? How do we see? How do we understand what we see? How do we communicate with others by visual means? These are basic questions that are still being asked by experts in the physiology of perception, communication, learning theory, and other fields. In fact, almost every department in the university is involved in knowledge that bears on radio, television, and film in a pretty direct way. In other words, studying these media can't possibly be a neatly defined process and you as a student will be learning things drawn from many different fields. So, understanding images and how they function can be a rather complex matter. Actually, you'll be thinking about this again and again in different contexts in this department--in television and film production courses as well as in history, criticism, and theory courses. Images are basic elements of the visual media and as such they are endlessly changing and, you'll probably find, endlessly fascinating.

We can start by thinking of images in terms of their usual function as part of communication process. In simple terms, any communication--by gesture, speech, visual image, written language, or whatever--by any means involves a sender, a message, and a receiver.

sender----->message----->receiver

If it's a two way system, as with a two person conversation, the receiver may in turn become a sender.

We can expand this model to help think about communicating images:



The maker and the sender can be as elementary as a friend taking your picture with a Polaroid camera and then giving you the resulting snapshot, or it might be as complicated as an entire production unit making a film or tv show within a corporate structure that connects up with other corporate bodies to broadcast or distribute and exhibit a work. The receiver or audience might be one person (the snapshot) or millions of people simultaneously or at different times and places.

The medium, or the means of communication--print, television, film, etc.--can vary as well, and it in turn can be shaped by its specific nature--commercial or noncommercial, intended for a specific audience or mass audience, and so forth. We might elaborate on this simple scheme and begin to account for other matters such as industry economics and governmental regulation--very important in considering broadcast tv, or example--or the mediating role of publicity, the press and critics in shaping how a film is received if we're considering Hollywood film, but this diagram will suffice for our purposes here.

One thing we should notice in the diagram is that all communication takes place within a social and historical context. Much of the time the sender and receiver share a common visual and cultural "language"--but not always. This is important to remember because it reminds us as makers of images that we have to constantly be aware of who our intended audience is, what they know, what we share with them. This is so because all visual communication (and aural communication too) relies on shared conventions. In many ways visual communication is similar to verbal language. For example, both are artificial--human created--and have to be learned by children. And while both visual images and speech actions are so much a part of everyday life that we usually don't think about them actively, in fact they are highly controlled means of communication. By becoming more conscious of how images communicate we can better understand how to achieve our own goals in using images.

Our diagram above indicates that any images exists in a social and historical context for sender and receiver, maker and audience. There has to be a common basis, a shared knowledge, for the maker to produce an image the audience can understand. These shared elements are sometimes called conventions or codes. For example, we can usually tell a great deal from an image of a person of our own time and culture by the way the person is dressed. A dress code, then, is a kind of generally

known social information that can often give us clues about a person's sex, age, occupation, social standing, economic position, and so forth. When we cross into a very different culture than our own, however, it may be very hard to read such clues very well.

Some simple exercises can make this clearer. One. On campus what clues from how a person is dressed might indicate their occupation? What might you expect the following people to be wearing: student, clerical staff, administrator, truck driver for buildings and grounds. Two. Does clothing indicate anything about personality? Watch a television drama without the sound. What can you deduce about the characters from the way they are dressed? Are there clues on a crime show, for instance, that help you know which characters are the "good guys" and which ones are the "bad guys?" What are those clues? Three. Watch the local 10pm news by changing channels frequently. How is the main news reader dressed? How are the others dressed? Does the sportscaster get to wear more colorful clothing? the weather person? Why is this a cultural convention? What does it imply about sports in relation to the other news?

Because dress codes are part of our general social knowledge and help us deal with the tangible world as well as the world of images, we can call them general social codes. There are also codes or conventions specific to understanding visual images. For example, the gradual change over several seconds with a representation fading out and black becoming dominant followed by the gradual emergence of a new image is usually taken to mean the two images existed at different times. Another way to put it: a fade out to black followed by a fade in shows elapsed time. There is no "natural" reason why this is so. It is simply a generally understood visual convention--one that only came into existence in this century with its use in film. Obviously it is a useful cinematic code because a title card or sound track explanation isn't needed to say that the second image is "later." But notice just how artificial it is.

It's worth adding here a note on conventions and rules. In studying filmmaking, video, radio or other arts, you will often hear some people refer to things that are really conventions as "rules." What they usually mean is that if you want to communicate in the generally established way, or the dominant way, you should not depart from the existing conventions. There are some genuine "rules" in the media, but there are many more conventions, and you shouldn't confuse the two or your own thinking and creativity will be limited. It is a convention that a fade out/fade in indicates elapsed time. Most of the time most people will "read" a fade out/fade in that way, but you certainly can go "against the grain" of convention and use that expectation to deliberately deceive or confuse your audience (if that's what you want to do). Or you might use a fade out/fade in as a different kind of punctuation in editing a film, if you think your audience will understand what you are doing (and you do have a responsibility to help your audience understand what you've made).

So-called "rules" that are actually conventions end up changing with time. For example, twenty years ago it was a "rule" in commercial film and broadcast television that it was a mistake to let the light flares produced when the lens points at a direct light source be part of the image. Today such effects are rather commonplace and are used in "arty" shots of performers on tv, especially with rock groups on shows like MIDNIGHT SPECIAL. The point to remember is that rules are things you just can't change. For example, it's a rule that you have to have enough light reach the film to affect the emulsion or you won't get a picture. Conventions are generally accepted patterns that you can either work with, or work around, or work against, depending on what you want to achieve.

Once we begin to see just how much conventions shape our understanding of visual images we can also understand how we might shape the images we make. An immense amount of visual communication with images uses what is "taken for granted." This is useful to the extent that it makes understanding images easy throughout our society. At the same time, such a heavily conventionalized communication process also has its problems when we are trying to use images in a new or unconventional way, when we are trying to show dynamic processes such as changes which don't fit into the ready-made conventions around us. For example, in the 1960's, black groups frequently protested the portrayal of black people on television--both in terms of protesting the absence of blacks from programs and also the use of prejudiced stereotypes in representing blacks. This protest had the result of making noticeable changes in network policy and programming. But the old pattern had to be challenged to be changed because left to itself the system of conventional representation in visual images tends to rest at the status quo.

Another way of talking about this aspect of images is to say that images are ideological. In other words, images use and convey ideologies (which we'll define as systems of representation and thought linked to specific social groups in a society). We can expect that most images in our culture hold power and prestige in our society. To be specific: those who won, control, and manage the production of goods and services rather than those who actually make those goods and perform those services, men rather than women, white people rather than blacks and other minorities. And we can also expect that those with little power will have little chance to counter the existing pattern of visual communication.

It is precisely at critical junctures where issues of the existing codes and conventions become openly discussed public affairs and when policy--corporate or governmental--is formulated or reformulated that this essentially social nature of images becomes apparent. At times like these, the "taken for granted" image is no longer absorbed uncritically. We can learn much about images, how they function, and how we can change them, by looking at them in situations where they lose their "ordinary" or "everyday" character and are placed under tension.

Feminists have, in the past ten years, raised many objections to the traditional portrayal of women in the media. Thus the question of what kind of images of women are produced in film and on television is one that everyone working in these media is more aware of now than a decade ago. We have probably all come across arguments that explain why certain stereotypes are objectionable. At the same time, however, the question must be raised as to what constitutes a positive image of a women. If we get beyond the old stereotypes of the "dumb broad," the nasty mother-in-law, the "old Maid" and so forth, we still have to face the question of what an alternative might be. If we simply fall back on the existing patterns of visual convention, we may end up with women who simply take on make roles as they are already established--the woman cop, the female general, the lady executive. Such a change places women in men's positions, but without changing the nature of those positions. We might ask just how much of a change that is. Does a positive image for women simply involve substituting women for men? Similarly, was the point of black demands in the 60's to get Sanford and Son and The Jeffersons on tv, or are those shows just a measure of cooptation? What is a "positive" image? Does it involve creating new definitions of what masculinity and femininity are? How might we go about creating images to represent that? Clearly this gets beyond the strict level of images into much larger questions of social and political change. That's inevitable, for in our visual culture questions of representation, of what images are and how they operate, lead inevitably to larger questions. Today the image is so much a part of our life that we can't separate it from the other parts of our life. Understanding the image means understanding ourselves and our fellow human beings.

To understand theory, to do theory, to think theoretically, you have to learn to question the basic assumptions of theorists. Ask yourself: what is the main point? what is being said explicitly? what is being said implicitly? what is taken for granted? do I agree? why or why not?

What follows is a passage from André Bazin (flush left) with notes and comments (indented).

A STYLE THAT CREATES MEANING, conclusion to "The Great Diptych: Geology and Relief" in Orson Welles: A Critical View by André Bazin, tr. Jonathan Rosenbaum (NY: Harper & Row, 1978), pp.81-82

All great cinematic works doubtless reflect, more or less explicitly, the moral vision, the spiritual tendencies of their author.

If this is so, what would be the aim of film study? to discover this moral vision? how much of that could be determined by examining the life of the author? how much by examining the entire body of a director's films?

Doesn't this statement presuppose that the concept of authorship is not problematic?

What is being said or assumed here about "greatness" and "moral vision"?

What does Bazin mean by those terms? What is he saying is the relation between them?

What is a "moral vision," and how would one evaluate it?

Does Dreyer have more "spiritual tendencies" than Deren?

Is it true that an author's spiritual tendencies are reflected in a work? How does it happen? Is it a direct reflection or a distorted one? How could one compare a cynical moral vision (say Sternberg) with a sincere one (say Ford)? Would we want to establish a hierarchy of great authors on the basis of their moral vision? What would be the aim of such an effort? What would be the means? What would be the use?

Is Renoir more "spiritual" than Eisenstein? Does Bergman have more moral vision than Woody Allen? How could we discuss the moral vision of Kubelka? De Mille?

If you accepted this statement, how would you deal with Altman? How would you define his moral vision? Why is it that critics seem to split sharply on Altman's worth? Is Ken Russell a similar case?

Sartre wrote in reference to Faulkner and Dos Passos that every novelistic technique necessarily relates back to a metaphysics. If there was a metaphysics, the old form of découpage couldn't contribute to its expression: the world of Ford and Capra can be defined on the basis of their scripts, their themes, the dramatic effects they have sought, the choice of scenes. It is not to be found in the découpage as such. With Orson Welles, on the contrary, the découpage in depth becomes technique which constitutes the meaning of the story.

Découpage The design of the film, the arrangement of its shots. "Decoupage classique" is the French term for the old Hollywood style of seamless narration.--James Monaco, How to Read a Film (NY: Oxford U Press, 1977), p. 404.

Découpage does not mean cutting or editing, though it can bear on this process; it normally means the definitive form or structure of the film as described on paper, as it is to appear later on screen.--Hugh Gray, tr. note to Bazin, What is Cinema? vol. 2 (Berkley, U of Ca. Press, 1971), p. 181.

Formally, a film consists of a succession of fragments excerpted from a spatial and temporal continuum. Découpage in its third French meaning refers to what results when the spatial fragments, or, more accurately, the succession of

spatial fragments excerpted in the shooting process, converge with the temporal fragments whose duration may be roughly determined during the shooting, but whose final duration is established only on the editing table. The dialectical notion inherent in the term découpage enables us to determine, and therefore to analyze, the specific form of a film, its essential unfolding in time and space. Découpage as a structural concept involving a synthesis is strictly a French notion. An American film-maker (or film critic, in so far as American film critics are interested in film technique at all) conceives of a film as involving two successive and separate operations, the selection of a camera setup and then the cutting of the filmed images. It may never occur to English-speaking film-makers or English-speaking critics that these two operations stem from a single underlying concept, simply because they have at their disposal no single word for this concept.--Noel Burch, Theory of Film Practice (1969), tr. Helen R. Lane (NY: Praeger, 1973) p. 4.

It isn't merely a way of placing the camera, sets and actors (mettre en scène); it places the very nature of the story in question. With this technique, the cinema strays a little further from the theatre, becomes less a spectacle than a narrative.

What does it mean for a technique to "constitute the meaning of the story"?

What does it mean to "place the very nature of the story in question"?

Why should film become more of a narrative than spectacle?

Is this inherent in the "nature" of cinema?

How would Bazin then respond to Brakhage's MOTHLIGHT, a film of pure "spectacle", apparently.

Indeed, as in the novel, it isn't only the dialogue, the descriptive clarity, the behavior of the characters, but the style imparted to the language which creates meaning.

How is style defined if it creates meaning?

The objective nature of the modern novel, by reducing the strictly grammatical aspect of its stylistics to a minimum, has laid bare the secret essence of style. Certain qualities of the language of Faulkner, Hemingway, or Malraux would certainly not come through in translation, but the essential quality of their styles would not suffer because their style is almost completely identical with their narrative technique--the ordering in time of fragments of reality. The style becomes the inner dynamic principle of the narrative....--Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality", What is Cinema?, vol. 2, p. 31.

Does the denotation and connotation of "secret essence of style" as a critical phrase clarify or obscure? Is it true that the "essential quality" of Faulkner's style, or Hemingway's style, rests in their "ordering in time of fragments of reality"? Or is this a statement that could only be made by someone unfamiliar with the particular stylistic inflections of those two writers on the level of the sentence? How many American students of

Faulkner and Hemingway would agree with this discussion of the "essence" of their style?

What are the theoretical implications of style creating meaning?
What then do we say of content?

Might it be possible for content to be doing one thing and style doing something different? of "going against the grain" of the manifest content? Can we also read a latent content? Or is such a latent content just a variation on the meaning created by style?

Far from being--as some persist in saying, assuming inattentiveness in the spectator--a return to the "static shot" employed in the early days of cinema by Melies, Zecca and Feuillade, or else some rediscovery of filmed theatre, Welles' sequence shot is a decisive stage in the evolution of film language, which after having passed through the montage of the silent period and the decoupage of the talkies, is now tending to revert to the static shot, but by a dialectical progress which incorporates all the discoveries of *découpage* into the realism of the sequence shot. Of course Welles is not the only promoter of this evolution, to which Wyler's work also gives testimony. Renoir, for example, in all his French productions, did not cease to work in the same direction. But Welles has brought to it a powerful and original contribution which, like it or not, has shaken the edifices of cinematic tradition.

SEQUENCE SHOT A long, usually complex shot, often including complicated camera movements and action. Also called Plan-séquence.--Monaco, p. 428.

Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality--its continuity. Classical editing, deriving from Griffith, separated reality into successive shots which were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event....Orson Welles started a revolution by systematically employing a depth of focus that had so far not been used. Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an a priori significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern...the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene. ...Thanks to the depth of focus of the lens, Orson Welles restored to reality its visible continuity.
--Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality", vol. 2, p. 28.

Is it the case that a film can "force" the mind of the spectator to discern? What are the implications of such a theoretical position? How would we know if this kind of "forcing" a way of seeing was being used for good or bad ends, morally and politically? Doesn't Eisenstein's type of montage frequently come in for criticism for "forcing" reactions? Why is this kind of "forcing" ok? Or is it?

One may imagine that the intuition of the sequence shot, this new unit in film semantics and syntax, grew out of the vision of a director accustomed to placing the actor within the decor, who experienced traditional editing no longer

as a fluency or language but as a loss of efficacy, a mutilation of the spectacular possibilities of the image. For Welles, each scene to be played forms a complete unit in time and space.--Bazin, "The Great Diptych", p. 68.

In other words, the book [Dudley Andrew, André Bazin] is styled as a defense, but a defense against an enemy never called by its proper name. Yet absent though it may be from the book, the enemy is known nevertheless to be the variety of theoretical activity critical of Bazin, represented in this country by figures as otherwise diverse as Annette Michelson, Brian Henderson, and James Roy MacBean, and in France by such similarly disparate factions as those represented by Gerard Gozlan and the Cinéthique group, to mention only the more well-known. Among what their activities hold in common in their reading of Bazin is a rejection of his view that there is a transcendental truth to be found in reality, and expressible as such thanks to the recording/presentational properties of photography, which then comes to be seen as a instrument waiting to be deployed in a metaphysically-based campaign to "reveal" the essence--an essence spiritually instructive and therapeutic--of visible reality. Bazin's attachment to such a conception of reality (and his attendant valorization of the sequence-shot opposed to the undemocratic tyranny of Soviet montage), offering up its "reflection" to any artist's camera stopping long enough to fix a gaze upon it, is identified in turn as the cinema's true vocation, rather than as a particularly determined defense of a conventionalized realist depiction (a defense happily coincident with the flourishing of Italian neo-realism, whose generous defender Bazin became). But his real interests seem to side always with the modes of transcendence now available to us via cinematographic representation, and clearly his fascination with that tends ultimately to deny to the cinema any kind of sufficiency unto itself, so dependent is it on the eternal presence of the real whose truths it is fated to present, or, rather, to present once again to those who have yet to learn them.--Bill Horrigan, "André Bazin's Destiny", Jump Cut 19, p. 34.

Why does Bazin ignore Welles' sound editing? Given Welles' work in radio before making KANE, what might we look for in terms of sound in KANE and AMBERSONS?

Bazin preferred deep focus photography and the long take to montage because they preserved the natural continuity of reality rather than cutting it up and analyzing it. This was important to Bazin because...he believed in an ordered but unknowable universe into which one peered long and hard in order to discover its essence--a God of love. Thus any a priori analysis of reality by the filmmaker tended to reduce this possibility of insight by introducing abstractions.--John Hess, "La Politique des auteurs; part one: World View as Aesthetic", Jump Cut 1, p. 20, (1974).

One could even almost say that THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI is paradoxically the richest in meaning of Welles' films in proportion to the insignificance of the script: the plot no

longer interferes with the underlying action, from which the themes blossom out in something close to their pure states. Fundamentally moral themes, which reveal the essential obsessions of Wellesian ethics, and above all, an eminently contemporary awareness of the freedom of choice between good or evil, together with the feeling that this freedom of choice doesn't depend exclusively on the will of man, but is inscribed within a modern form of destiny.--Bazin, Welles, p.94.

La politique des auteurs was, in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war.--Hess, p.19.

...Any great painting is first of all a creation of the spirit which is sustained by the spirit. It has an existence beyond its material elements, which are only mediators.--Bazin, Jean Renoir, p. 130.

For some years, the misogyny of the American cinema has become a commonplace of intellectual criticism. Rita Hayworth (in LADY FROM SHANGHAI) was undoubtedly one of its first victims, and remains, through Welles' genius, its most glorious martyr.--Bazin, Welles, p. 94.

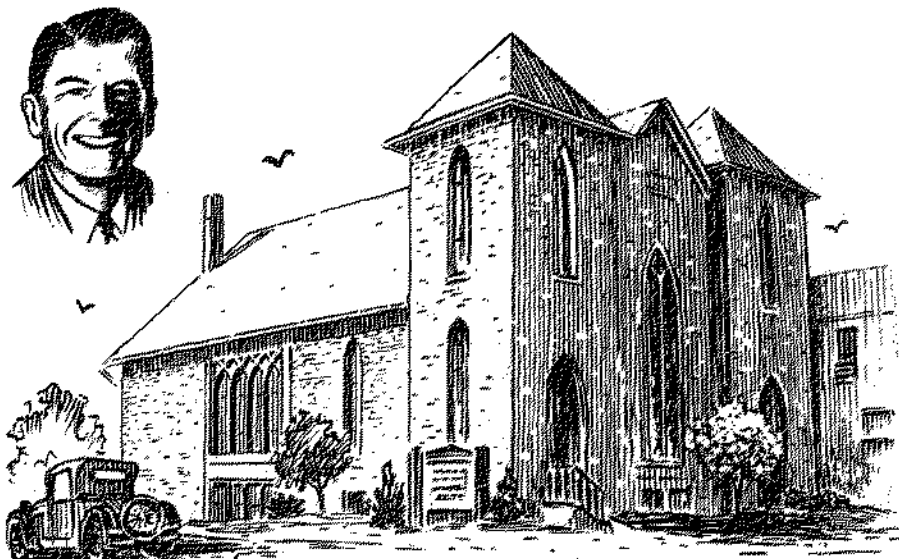
What of the misogyny of French criticism?

Is "genius" the right word to apply to a misogynistic filmmaker?

Is "genius" somehow separable from manifest content?

If all great cinematic works doubtlessly reflect the moral vision, the spiritual tendencies of their author, can a misogynist moral vision produce a great cinematic work?

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RONALD REAGAN'S BOYHOOD CHURCH: FIRST CHRISTIAN, DIXON, ILLINOIS